



United States Department of State  
*Bureau of Consular Affairs*

## Tips for Travelers to Saudi Arabia



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# **Tips for Travelers to Saudi Arabia**

Travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be a most interesting and rewarding experience. Major cultural differences could present some difficulties, however, for the uninformed American traveler. This brochure is intended to help familiarize potential travelers with the Saudi people, their customs, and the religion that dominates every facet of Saudi life.

## **The People of Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia's population of approximately 8.6 million is predominately Arab, with some admixture of non-Arab Muslims. Many Arabs from nearby countries in addition to significant numbers of expatriate workers from North America, Europe, South Asia, and the Far East are employed in the Kingdom. Nearly 36% of the inhabitants of Saudi Arabia are resident foreigners.

Saudi Arabia is a Muslim country and its language is Arabic. No public worship of any religion other than Islam is permitted. English is acknowledged as a second language and is taught in secondary schools.

## **Islam**

Islam is not just a religion but a total way of life. It prescribes behavior for individuals and society: codifying law, family relationships, business etiquette, dress, food, personal hygiene, and much more. As the single most important factor in Saudi culture, Islam dominates nearly all activities and policies of both the Government and the people.

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammed and the origin of Islam. The Saudi Government considers it a sacred duty to safeguard two of the greatest shrines of Islam located in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Travel to Mecca and Medina is forbidden to non-Muslims. Mecca joins Jeddah and Riyadh as one of the country's largest cities. Muslims throughout the world turn to this city five times a day for prayer.

Visitors should not photograph mosques nor people who are praying; nor military or government installations; nor key industrial, communications, or transportation facilities.

## **Saudi Culture and Customs**

Among the values important to people of this region is a family-centered way of life, including a protected role for women and clear limits on their participation in public life. Muslims believe open social relations between the sexes result in the breakdown of family life. Contact between men and women, therefore, is rigidly controlled.

Visitors to Saudi Arabia must observe local standards of dress and personal conduct. Although Westerners have some leeway in company compounds in dress and social contacts, they should exercise discretion in public places. Women are required to wear clothing that covers their necks, arms, and legs. Dancing in public, public showing of movies, and mixed bathing and driving by women are forbidden. Import, manufacture, and consumption of alcoholic beverages or drugs are strictly forbidden. These and other beliefs and practices shape and define the Saudi culture.

The workweek in Saudi Arabia is Saturday through Wednesday. Government offices and businesses are closed on Thursdays and Fridays. Restaurants, stores, and other public places are expected to close briefly upon hearing the call to prayer, and Muslims will stop their work to pray during the call.

## **Entry Visas and Requirements**

The Saudi Government does not issue tourist visas, but it does issue two types of entry visas: one for temporary business visits or visitation of relatives, the other for individuals entering Saudi Arabia on an employment contract.

### **Temporary Visits**

All applicants for temporary visit visas for the purpose of business consultations must have a Saudi company or individual sponsor their application. The Saudi sponsor will notify the Saudi Foreign Ministry, which will forward the visa authorization to the appropriate Saudi Embassy or consulate. Applicants who wish to visit relatives must have the Saudi sponsor of their relatives request authorization of the application in the manner described above.

If an individual is present in the Kingdom on a temporary visit visa and has obtained Saudi sponsorship for employment, he/she must exit Saudi Arabia to obtain an entry visa for employment. This visa need not be issued in the individual's country of origin, but the applicant must be physically present to apply for the visa.

### **Employment/Residence**

Visas for this category are obtained in a manner similar to the above procedures. Additional documentation, such as a letter from the sponsoring company, a copy of the signed contract, or a copy of the applicant's university degree may be required. The employee's dependents (spouse and children under the age of 18) may be brought into Saudi Arabia only with the concurrence of the Saudi sponsor and authorization of the foreign ministry. Ordinarily, only managers and professionals (holders of college degrees) may bring their families. Children over age 18 are likely to be refused residence.

Persons entering Saudi Arabia for the purpose of employment are issued residence permits soon after initial entry. These permits are evidence of legal residence in Saudi Arabia and must be retained at all times.

Persons resident in Saudi Arabia may not depart the country under any circumstances, however exigent, without obtaining an exit visa. Exit visas are issued only upon request of the Saudi sponsor. The American Embassy is not able to "sponsor" exit visas for Americans resident in Saudi Arabia under any circumstances. In a genuine emergency, however, the Embassy will use its good offices in an attempt to facilitate the Saudi sponsor's request for the exit visa.

### **Retention of U.S. Passport by Sponsor**

Persons present in Saudi Arabia on temporary visit visas should not surrender their passport to the Saudi sponsor except for the most valid reasons. The passport and visa are the only evidence of the bearer's legal right to be present in the country.

Persons resident in Saudi Arabia are almost always required to surrender their passports, and those of their dependents, to the Saudi sponsor. This practice is specifically authorized in the Saudi employment law. If an urgent need for travel exists and if the Saudi sponsor will not release the first passport, a replacement passport will be issued upon request. The issuance of a replacement passport does not guarantee, however, that a person will be able to depart Saudi Arabia since the replacement passport would not contain a Saudi residence permit or exit visa.

### **Alcohol**

Under the strict prohibition against consumption, sale, or possession of alcoholic beverages or any items with alcoholic content. Saudi officials make no exceptions. Travelers should also exercise extreme care and discretion

when consuming alcohol on flights landing in the Kingdom. Persons obviously inebriated are subject to arrest or deportation.

## Drugs

Many drugs sold with or without prescription in other countries may be illegal in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Captagon (fenetylline hydrochloride), a name-brand diet pill available without a prescription in the Near East and Far East, is considered an illegal substance in Saudi Arabia. Americans in Saudi Arabia have received prison sentences of up to 2-1/2 months in prison and 70 lashes for possession of Captagon.

The attempted importation of drugs or controlled substances, even in very small amounts, is a serious offense under Saudi law. The traveler will be arrested and tried for carrying drugs into the country. The considerable number of Americans currently in Saudi prisons serving sentences averaging 2 years for drug possession or use and more severe sentences for smuggling underscores the gravity with which authorities treat drug offenses in the Kingdom. The customs authorities are now using dogs to detect drugs at Saudi airports.

Prescription drugs in small quantities, clearly labeled with the traveler's name, doctor's name, pharmacy, and contents of the container, should cause no problem. Difficulties are likely to arise, however, if any or all of the following circumstances exist:

- 1) There are large amounts of drugs;
- 2) Drugs are unlabeled and loose;
- 3) No "documentation" accompanies the drugs; or
- 4) The drugs are illicit to begin with.

Even doctors have been challenged going through customs in Saudi Arabia. The importation of drugs in large amounts can be done legally only through the Ministry of Health. A traveler carrying drugs in large amounts without documents from the Ministry of Health will be in

trouble at customs. Under the Islamic law of Saudi Arabia, drug offenses are considered major and leniency in drug cases is highly unlikely.

## **Other Items**

The following items are forbidden:

- items considered pornographic by Saudi standards, including magazines and video cassettes;
- firearms of any type, ammunition, related items such as gunsights, and gun magazines; and
- items on the Arab boycott list and banned books.

Personal religious items such as a Bible or rosary are usually permitted, but travelers should be aware that on occasion, these items have been seized at entry.

## **Commercial/Business Disputes**

Disputes between parties who do not have a signed formal contract must be settled through mutual agreement or through an appeal to the local governor (amir) for judgment. Such disputes usually involve business representatives present on temporary visit visas. Some Saudi business sponsors have attempted to gain possession of the passports of their visitors as a "bargaining chip" in disputes, but such actions are not authorized under Saudi law.

Commercial disputes between parties who have a formal contract can be brought to the Commercial Arbitration Board of the Saudi Chamber of Commerce or to the Committee for the Settlement of Commercial Disputes of the Ministry of Commerce. Disputes involving a government

Referring matters to commercial or labor  
tribunals can be costly and time consuming.

The Embassy will offer its good offices to assist in  
settling disputes, but ultimate responsibility for  
obtaining private legal counsel and resolving a  
dispute through the Saudi legal system lies with  
the parties involved. Lists of local attorneys are  
available at all posts.

American business persons should be aware that if  
a Saudi party in a commercial dispute files a  
complaint with the authorities, Saudi law permits  
preventing the exit of the foreign party until the  
dispute is completely settled, including payment of  
damages.

Saudi law is applied exclusively in all  
commercial/contract dispute cases, even if the  
contract was drawn up and/or signed outside Saudi  
Arabia. The Arabic text of the contract or  
agreement is considered binding; an accurate  
English translation should be obtained before any  
document in Arabic is signed.

## **Customs Clearance**

Customs clearance procedures in Saudi Arabia are  
formal, thorough, and lengthy; frequently, they  
involve a full search of every piece of luggage.  
Transit passengers who wish to leave the transit  
area of the airport are subject to the same strict  
searches as arriving passengers.

## **Food Items**

Travelers may not import any food items.  
Customs officials at airports enforce the  
restriction against the importation of food items.

## **Pets**

Lost pets, except dogs, may be kept  
in the country provided they are accom-  
panied by a health certificate authenticated by  
the consulate in the country of origin.

banned with the exception of guard dogs, hunting dogs, and seeing-eye dogs. Dogs in these excepted categories must be accompanied not only by a health certificate but also a certificate authenticated by the Saudi consulate in the country of origin attesting to the fact that the dog fits into one of the excepted categories.

## **Useful Addresses and Telephone Numbers**

American Embassy  
Sulaimaniah District  
P.O. Box 9041  
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia  
(Tel: (01) 464-0012)

Effective May 1986, the new address will be  
American Embassy  
Diplomatic Quarter  
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Mailing address outside Saudi Arabia:  
American Embassy  
APO New York 09038

American Consulate General  
Between Aramco Hqrs and Dhahran Int'l Airport  
P.O. Box 81  
Dhahran Airport  
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia  
(Tel: (03) 891-3200)

Mailing address outside Saudi Arabia:  
American Consulate General  
APO New York 09616

American Consulate General  
Palestine Road, Ruwais  
P.O. Box 149  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia  
(Tel: (02) 667-0080)

Mailing address outside Saudi Arabia:  
American Consulate General  
APO New York 09697

